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AUTHOR Foster, Margaret E.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The following questions are investigated: Are there identifiable dimensions along which resident and commuter students systematically differ? If there are differences, will the commuting student appear to be educationally, socially, and attitudinally disadvantaged as suggested by several studies? Can subgroups of commuters be defined with characteristics and needs sufficiently diverse to merit special program attention by student personnel workers? Using the 1975 University Student Census, data were gathered on 1,532 incoming freshmen students at the University of Maryland, College Park. The original sample was categorized into students who expected to be living at home or with relatives (dependent commuter), students living off-campus apart from relatives (independent commuter), and students living in residence halls, fraternities, or sororities. The general conclusion is that there are differences between resident and commuting students, but that commuters are not clearly disadvantaged. Subgroups of commuters differ more from one another than from resident students and should be considered a heterogeneous group. (Author/LBH)

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1975

A COMPARISON OF DEPENDENT COMMUTERS, INDEPENDENT COMMUTERS, and RESIDENT STUDENTS

Margaret E. Foster, William E. Sedlacek,
and Mark H. Hardwick

Research Report # 8-75

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SUMMARY

The following questions were investigated in the study: Are there identifiable dimensions along which resident and commuter students systematically differ? If there are differences, will the commuting student appear to be educationally, socially, and attitudinally disadvantaged as suggested by several studies? Secondly, can we define subgroups of commuters with characteristics and needs sufficiently diverse to merit special program attention by student personnel workers?

Employing the 1975 University Student Census, data were gathered on 1532 incoming freshman students at the University of Maryland, College Park. The original sample was categorized into students who expected to be living at home or with relatives (dependent commuter), students living off-campus apart from relatives (independent commuter), and students living in residence halls, fraternities or sororities.

Of the 52 items analyzed, overall 21 items significantly discriminated between the samples. More specifically, 14 items differentiated between independent commuters and residents, 14 items discriminated between dependent commuters and residents, and 19 items differed between independent and dependent commuters. There were no significant differences found between the three samples on 31 of the items.

The general conclusion is that there are differences between resident and commuting students; however, commuters are not clearly disadvantaged. And, secondly, subgroups of commuters are more different from one another than from resident students and, therefore, should be considered a heterogeneous group.

A prime requisite in developing any student personnel program is knowledge of the students the program is intended to serve. One group of students on which empirical knowledge is limited is the commuter student. Though it is estimated that 75% (Slade and Jarmul, 1975) of the students in our nation are commuters, the paucity of research of this particular student population has been noted (Graff and Cooley, 1970;). Slade and Jarmul (1975) have even referred to commuter students as the "neglected majority."

A survey of existing research and opinions held by student personnel workers seems to reveal conflicting views on whether commuters in general, and subgroups of commuters in particular, manifest characteristics and attributes unique to them which would require specific programming or services. Therefore, the intention of this study is to provide framework for identifying and examining dimensions along which commuters and resident students differ.

A review of the literature relevant to college students reveals that historically this population has been viewed as a rather homogeneous group. Not until about the 1960's does the available research suggest that student personnel workers were starting to become aware of differences among various subgroups of students. And, importantly some commuter versus resident student investigations emerged.

A survey of the resident-commuter studies reveals several overall conclusions. For example, a considerable amount of research on commuter-residen differences appears to describe the commuter as relatively disadvantaged. Chickering (1974) and Chickering and Kuper (1971) in collaboration with the American Council of Education (Astin and Panos, 1970), have collected extensive data from thousands of students throughout all types of collegiate institutions. Chickering concludes that differences between resident and

commuting freshmen are the differences between the have and have-nots. It is reported that residents are younger, have higher incomes, obtain more education, achieve higher GPA's in high school and higher scores on aptitude test than commuters. Residents are said to have higher degree aspirations, enter college with broader and more liberal interests in national and world affairs, are more autonomous, and are less concerned about financial problems and materialistic success than commuters. Other investigators such as Kysar (1964), who reviewed mental health differences between commuters and residents, and Stark (1965), who explored the extent of financial, employment, home and family problems among commuters and residents, have perpetuated the tendency to place the commuter at the lower end of the "have-not" continum along a variety of dimensions. On the other hand, Harrington (1972), in reviewing the literature on commuting students, concludes that there are educational, social, and psychological differences between these two groups; though the differences are not always in favor of resident students.

Studies on commuters have typically defined the commuter as a student who lives at home with parents or relatives and drives to classes. Residents are equated with those students who reside in on-campus housing (Brown and Richek, 1968; George, 1971; Graff and Cooley, 1970; Stark, 1965). Though research on commuters in general is limited, there has been an even greater dearth of systematic research on specific commuter subgroups. For example, Slade and Jarmul (1975) suggest that there are many subgroups of commuters, subgroups with characteristics sufficiently diverse to merit serious consideration by student personnel workers when planning programs. Some of the subgroups of students include veterans, the elderly, returning women (and men) married versus single students, various ethnic groups, etc.

Though limited in number, there have been some investigators who support the assumption that commuters are a diverse group. Some interesting sub-groupings have been formulated and their respective characteristics identified. Pettyway (1968) subdivided resident and commuter students into married versus nonmarried, and those students who were enrolled in college for the first time versus those with previous college attendance. Although he did not find differences between freshman commuter and resident subgroups, he found that among juniors on the California Psychological Inventory commuters earned a lower score on the communality, achievement via independence, achiever via conformance, and femininity scales. Baird (1969) sub-grouped his samples of several thousand men and women attending 29 colleges into students residing in five different living arrangements: dorms, Greeks, off-campus apartments, on-campus apartments, and living at home. The subjects rated themselves on 31 personality traits and 35 life goals. Baird found that Greek residents were more active in social and leadership activities and that, in general, all on-campus residents were more active in social affairs. However, the five subgroups were similar on such variables as rate of achievement, satisfaction with college, self-concept, and goals. Another type of commuter subgrouping was implemented by Sedlacek, Brooks, Miyares, and Hardwick (1976) at the University of Maryland. They found that compared to the white commuter, the black commuter tended to be an older, married, female traveling farther, spending more time and money to get to campus, and receiving lower grades.

In studies similar to this one, other researchers have employed a subgrouping of commuters into those living in on-campus housing, off-campus apartments and homes, and living with parents or relatives. Chickering and Kuper (1971) concluded that students residing in off-campus housing reported similar college experiences to students living at home. Astin (1973) conducted a longitudinal research project with two million subjects from 500 institutions

which was designed to assess the impact of different college environments. ACT and SAT tests and a 150 item questionnaire were administered to the sample in the Fall of 1966 with a four year follow-up. One aspect of the research included dividing the freshman sample into students residing in campus housing, living with parents, and living in other private dwellings. Astin's conclusion was that living in a private residence apart from parents or relatives produced results that paralleled those living in college dorms. Hountras and Brandt (1970) employed a similar subgrouping of 270 single, male students and found higher GPA's among those students residing off-campus as compared to campus residents. Ryan (1970), employing the same categories with a sample of 1400 Villanova Freshmen, found no significant differences in academic success, but found that living at home did discourage collegiate participation.

The purpose of the present study is to investigate differences among types of commuters (independent and dependent) and resident students.

Method

A questionnaire was administered to a representative sample of 1532 entering freshmen at the University of Maryland, College Park, attending a summer orientation program. The University Student Census (USC) measures a variety of demographic, educational, and attitudinal variables. It should be kept in mind throughout this study that some of the USC items measure expected behaviors and attitudes rather than actual experiences. Additionally, these students have not yet actually been commuting or residing in college dorms at the time of assessment.

Dependent commuters indicated that they would be residing either in parents' or guardian's home, or other relative's home. Independent commuters

expected to be: living alone in an off-campus room or apartment, sharing a room or apartment, owning or renting a house (living alone), or sharing a house. Resident students were those who reported that they would be living in a University residence hall, or a fraternity or sorority house.

Results

Responses to the 52 items were analyzed by 28 chi-squares and 24 analyses of variance at the .05 level. Post hoc Scheffe tests at the .10 level were conducted for all significant F tests. However, since there is no post hoc test appropriate for the chi-square, the investigator speculated as to which sample(s) appeared to account for the significant differences.

Of the 52 items analyzed, 21 items significantly discriminated between the samples. Sakoda, Cohen, and Beall (1954) state that when 52 tests are run at the .05 level it can be expected that 6 tests may be significant by chance. Since this investigation resulted in 21 significant tests, it can generally be concluded that place of residence is a significant variable in accounting for differences among the three samples.

When each combination of two samples was compared, 14 items significantly discriminated between independent commuters and resident students, 14 items differentiated between dependent commuters and residents, and 19 items differed significantly between independent and dependent commuters. Table 1 provides specific item and directional differences between the samples.

In reviewing the items that distinguish independent commuters from resident students, the term "independent" does seem appropriately discriptive. By comparison, this group of commuters is more likely to be male and live out-of-state, their mothers have had more education, and they were less influenced by their fathers and more by friends in their decision to go to college.

They appear to be generally more conservative in their attitudes toward several social issues as reflected in their selection of items such as "the best way to provide higher education to black and white students is to let things happen naturally with no further intervention," and they are less likely to take a black studies course. Interestingly, they have more expectations of getting involved in some campus activities such as varsity athletics. Independent commuters are less likely to have selected the University of Maryland as their first choice, and they decided to go to college at a later date than resident students. Unlike the resident sample, independent commuters are not supportive of busing services to the adjoining cities.

Dependent commuters, in comparison to resident students, appear to be somewhat more pragmatic and interested in meeting some basic survival needs. More of the dependent commuters chose the University of Maryland because of its geographical location. More of them are males, they are more likely to be working, and anticipate a greater income. Like the independent commuter sample, they appear to be more conservative or neutral along some items that tap social attitudes. For example, relative to resident students, they are less likely to take a course in the black studies program. Perhaps as an expression of their utilitarian perspective on education, dependent commuters indicate that they feel less of a sense of identity with the University and expect to be less involved in some campus activities such as intramural athletics than resident students. However, dependent commuters would be more supportive of a campus transportation system to the suburbs.

Independent commuters are different from dependent commuters along a variety of variables. In some respects the independent commuter initially appears more autonomous in that he/she is more likely to be moving to the campus from out-of-state and is less influenced by his/her father on such

issues as going to college. On the other hand, the independent commuter is less likely to be working and financially self-supporting. This may provide some evidence to speculate that the independent commuter may be more affluent since he/she isn't as likely to be working and comes from a home with a more highly educated mother. Though the independent commuter reports a stronger sense of identification with the University and is in less disagreement with expecting to participate in campus activities such as varsity and intramural athletics, he/she may feel less of a committment to the University since it was not his/her first choice and he/she selected it relatively late. Though both samples are generally neutral concerning several social issues, independent commuters more frequently adopt a laissez-faire attitude toward the best way for helping black and whites to obtain higher education and allocating funds to male and female athletic programs than dependent commuters.

Finally, it is important to look at some of the similarities between commuters and residents. This investigation revealed that the three samples were similar along the majority of the items, and this is somewhat different from what several other studies have found. For example, the majority of the students in the three samples report similar educational aspirations and values. That is, most intend to earn a bachelor's degree plus some graduate education, their main educational objective is to earn skills applicable to a career, and the factors of most importance in making a career choice are economic ones such as anticipated earnings and rapid advancement. In terms of academic experiences and competencies, commuters and residents report high school GPA's of "B" and similar reading and library usage patterns. The samples report very similar expectations of the University, i.e. they feel the major function of the University is to provide a general learning facility they are not interested in designing their own major, and they are moderately

supportive of a mandatory fee for a campus shuttle bus service. The samples are similar along several socioeconomic dimensions such as their father's typically having college degrees, and they are all mildly concerned over financing their education. They expect that their hardest adjustment to college will be budgeting time wisely and studying efficiently. Additionally, there appears to be a shared attitude of moderation in regard to many social issues, e.g. they are not especially supportive of actively recruiting blacks, probably won't take a course in the women's studies program, and they are not very supportive of the University sponsoring a day care center. They indicate that the most important issue for society to resolve is the economy and they disagree with the statement that our country should place less emphasis on working hard.

Discussion

It was expected that incoming freshmen, grouped into independent commuters, dependent commuters, and resident student samples, would differ across a variety of demographic, educational, social, and attitudinal variables. However, it was anticipated that the commuter samples would not necessarily display the preponderance of disadvantaged attributes suggested by Chickering (1974) and others (Kysar, 1964; Stark, 1965). Secondly, it was expected that commuters would not be a homogeneous group, and that specifi subgroups would manifest characteristics which are significantly different and therefore would merit attention by student personnel workers (George, 1971; Graff and Cooley, 1970; Stark, 1965).

The results of this study indicate that place of residence does account for a significant number of demographic, educational, and social differences found between the three samples. Results also showed that commuting students

did not display clear-cut and stereotypical "have-not" characteristics. A second finding was that subgroups of commuters are more different from one another than they are from resident students. And, finally, the three samples were found to be similar along many important dimensions.

Some conclusions which can be drawn, based on the findings of this study, are that resident and commuter students are not the "haves" versus the "have-nots" as suggested by Chickering and Kuper (1971). Nor is there ample evidence that commuters exhibit more mental health concerns (Kysar, 1964) or that they have more financial and employment problems (Stark, 1965). Generally, incoming freshmen classified as dependent commuters, independent commuters, and residents at the University of Maryland appear to have similar educational degree objectives, vocational-career aspirations, academic competencies, reading patterns, anticipated involvement in individual creative activities on campus, expectations of changing their major, father's level of education, financial and social-emotional adjustmental concerns, general expectations of the University, attitudes toward such social issues as blacks and the economy, and general feelings about the social health of our nation.

In a study similar to this one, Astin (1973) investigated dependent and independent subgroups of commuters and compared them to residents. He concluded that characteristics of independent commuters paralleled those of resident students. While the present study found seven variables in common between independent commuters and resident students which distinguished them from dependent commuters, an equal number of variables were found to be similar between dependent commuters and residents that distinguished them independent commuters. Therefore, this finding suggests that subgroups of commuters differ more from one another than they differ from resident students. Baird (1969) also conducted a similar subgroup and resident study. The

findings in this investigation question Baird's conclusion that residents are clearly more active in social affairs, but support his finding that in terms of academic competencies and goals there were no significant differences.

While some inferences may be drawn from these findings regarding the similarities and differences between commuter subgroups and residents, conclusions need to be viewed with some caution. For instance, it may have been possible that special subgroups of students such as returning women, veterans, etc., were less likely to attend the orientation than the more typical 18 year old freshman, although over 95% of all entering freshmen did attend. Also only incoming freshmen were surveyed. It is possible that there may be some characteristics of already enrolled students that would limit generalizing these results. Additionally, this questionnaire surveys, in many instances, expected behaviors and attitudes rather than actual experiences. Manipulation of the independent variable - place of residence - is based upon one of the expectancy items and, therefore, the samples of incoming freshmen have not actually commuted or lived in dorms. Therefore, it might be possible that while place of residence may have a potential impact on students, in one sense this impact has not yet been fully realized. Another important and possible source of invalidity in this design is the differential selection process employed by the Office of Resident Life as it determined residence status. While socioeconomic status has been the major determinant in the past (George, 1971) as to who lived where, more recently such variables as membership in special interest groups (e.g. band, athletics, etc.) partially determine place of residence.

In conclusion, the results of this study generally question the validity of such investigations as that conducted by Chickering (1974) which suggest that, relative to resident students, commuting students are disadvantaged

socially, academically, and personally. However, this study is basically consistent with results found by Dollar (1966) and Kaludis and Zatkin (1966), who report a similar lack of differences on many variables among students in different living groups. This investigation also concurs with the general conclusions of other dependent-independent commuter subgroup studies (e.g. Astin, 1973; Hountras and Brandt, 1970; Ryan, 1970) in that there is increasing evidence indicating that commuters are not a homogeneous group, but rather display important subgroup differences.

The hope and concern to which this study brings us is a realization that with the growing number of commuting students across the nation, we need to realize and plan for the needs and characteristics of emerging subgroups of commuters. And, importantly, we cannot continue to view commuters, relative to resident students, as less competent or less committed to their personal and educational pursuits.

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Table 1.

USC Items Significantly Discriminating Among Independent Commuters, Resident Students, and Dependent Commuters

	Independent Commuters vs. Resident Students (14)	Dependent Commuters vs. Resident Students (14)	Independent vs. Dependent Commuters (19)
Demographic Items	Greater number of males More likely to have lived out-of-state past 5 years Mothers more likely to have some college education	Greater number of males More likely to be working Anticipate higher income while in school	More likely to have lived out-of-state Mothers have more education Less likely to be working and Anticipate less income
Attitudes and Social Issues	Less likely to be influenced by father in their decision to go to college Less likely to take course in black studies program Social life and job experiences more likely to have contributed to their development More frequently report that the best way for the State to provide higher education to Blacks/Whites is to let things happen with no further intervention and Best way to decide how to allocate funds to male and female athletic programs is to see how other schools allocate these funds	Less likely to take a course in black studies program More frequently indicate they are in favor of letting things happen naturally as the best way of providing higher education for Black and White students Less likely to report best way to allocate funds to M-F athletic programs is to see how other schools allocate these funds	Fewer were influenced by their fathers in their decision to attend college Less likely to indicate U. of M. as first college choice Made final decision to attend at a later date and More frequently chose U. of M. due to its academic program Social life and job experiences are more likely to have contributed to their development More likely to report that the best way to provide higher education to Blacks/Whites is to let things happen naturally and More likely to feel best way to allocate M-F athletic funds is to see how other schools finance their athletics and use results as a guide program

Table 1.

USC Items Significantly Discriminating Among Independent Commuters, Resident Students, and Dependent Commuters

(Continued)

	Independent Commuters vs. Resident Students (14)	Dependent Commuters vs. Resident Students (14)	Independent vs. Dependent Commuters (19)
Expectations of University	More frequently report neutral about participating in varsity athletics and Expecting their parents to attend Parent Orientation U. of M. less likely to be first choice and They decide to attend U. of M. at a later date	More frequently attend U. of M. because of its geographical location Feels less a sense of identity with University Less likely to get involved in campus activities or Participate in intramural athletics More frequently disagree parents will attend Parent Orientation	More frequently report that they are neutral about participating in varsity athletics and Parents attending Parent Orientation and Getting involved in campus activities and Participating in intramural athletics Feel a greater sense of identity with U. of M.
Needs	More neutral regarding busing services to Baltimore More neutral regarding busing services to Washington	More supportive of busing services from suburbs Less supportive of busing services from Baltimore Less supportive of busing services from Washington	Less supportive of busing services from Baltimore Less supportive of busing services from Washington, D. C. More neutral regarding busing services from suburbs